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A. L. Tholin—Engineering, His Mission

by

Robert J. Harman, with Richard and Phyllis Tholin

This article presents the story of a layman who in retirement entered missionary service—but not in the way we are accustomed to see missionaries function. It is an important story of a man whose impact affected the lives of thousands, if not millions, of people in an impressive life of Christian service.

It is Sunday morning in the late 1930s or early 1940s. The location is the Norwood Park Evangelical Church, a neighborhood church on the northwest side of Chicago. Sunday school classes reassemble for the “closing exercise” with Superintendent A. L. (Linne) Tholin presiding. Attendance has been taken and reported. Announcements have been made. The pianist begins playing the refrain of the closing hymn, and the gathering of young and old join in singing again one of Tholin’s favorites.¹ “Come we that love the Lord, And let our joys be known; Join in a song with sweet accord, And thus surround the throne. We’re marching to Zion, Beautiful, beautiful Zion, We’re marching upward to Zion, That beautiful city of God.”

For Linne Tholin the spiritual imagery of the “beautiful city of God” would become the tangible reality of his chosen vocation. Civil engineering was his calling and his employment was with Chicago’s Department of Public Works. His interest in public service began with the completion of high school when he joined a railroad survey team planning for expanded transportation in growing metropolitan Chicago. This was followed by a term of service in World War I with the U.S. Navy civil engineer corps building airfields in Georgia.

Tholin’s major at the University of Illinois School of Engineering in waste water management qualified him for his initial employment in Chicago with the Metropolitan Sanitary District in 1925. In 1939 he moved to the City’s Department of Subways and

Superhighways and later organized the Sewer Planning Division of the Department of Public Works followed by advancements to the posts of administrative engineer and ultimately Engineer for Public Works for the city.

Much like an itinerant pastor in the Evangelical United Brethren Church, Tholin moved his family, wife Ruth and son Richard, from their home in suburban Downers Grove to meet the residency requirements for assuming his leadership positions with Chicago. He admitted considering the ministry as a young man but chose engineering “because of its greater tangibles.”²

In reviewing Linne Tholin’s public career accomplishments some might compare his professional passion to that of the renowned New York City planner, Robert Moses, whose many notable landmarks enhance the life of that city. Tholin’s calling in Chicago was to design and build essential structural elements for the functioning of a modern city. In transportation he redesigned the subway system and managed the contractual agreements as well as the construction of Chicago’s O’Hara airport. He did the same for the Chicago Skyway, an elevated highway linking the downtown expressways to the Interstate highway system at Gary, Indiana.

It was waste water management that became his specialization. Chicago’s waste lines were made exponentially more complex in design and construction given the city’s flat topography, increasing volumes of waste, and the need to

prevent the contamination of pristine waterways, especially its greatest natural asset, Lake Michigan. The milestone achievement of earlier city engineers of routing the waste away from the city by reversing the flow of the Illinois River and sending it to the Mississippi and New Orleans, no longer met capacity requirements. Tholin's service is credited with the construction of 150 miles of major sewers greatly alleviating flooding of basements and underpasses in the city. And, after retiring, he was enlisted as a consultant to the engineering team that designed the city's deep tunnel system comprising 109 miles of huge underground tunnels constructed to deal with overflows by conveying them to large storage reservoirs. This system was put into effect in 1985 and was a huge success resulting in improved water quality and cleaner waterways that continue to serve the city's recreational and environmental needs.

Tholin's public service was recognized with the awarding of the Octave Chanute medal of the Western Society of Engineers and the Rudolph Hering medal of the American Society of Civil Engineers for outstanding contributions to the advancement of sanitary engineering. His standing with these professional associations and his technical publications brought invitations from other metropolitan areas, including Washington D.C., to contribute to major development project designs.

A layperson with such high level credentials and leadership skills would not be confined to serving local church needs. Tholin was elected annually to represent the Norwood Park congregation at the sessions of the Illinois Annual Conference (until 1946 Evangelical and afterwards Evangelical United Brethren). He was an able spokesperson on the floor of the conference on many issues resulting in his election to the Administrative Board of the Conference. He was also a willing worker and enabler of various projects of the conference including the church summer assembly grounds in Naperville, Illinois, where evangelists held forth in a great tabernacle and where countless of the faithful could identify their conversion experiences. This site was eventually transformed into a summer camping site for children and youth. It needed new housing units and infrastructure to serve that function

however. Tholin enlisted the conference EUB Men's unit in a three-year fund-raising campaign and work project with teams of volunteers completing a circle of several cabins of his design with running water and showers by 1958. In 1959 Tholin was recognized as one of three "laymen of the year" by the Church Federation of Greater Chicago for his contributions to church and society.

While attending a church social event in the summer of 1961 at the Naperville camp groups, Tholin confided to Dr. Wilbur Harr his plan to retire from his duties with the City of Chicago later that year. He expressed a desire to explore missionary service opportunities for his early retirement years. Harr, Professor of Christian Missions at the Evangelical School of Theology in Naperville, offered his assistance by contacting not only the EUB Board of Missions, but other denominational boards as well. The United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. came up with the most compelling offer. Their affiliate Bangkok Christian College in Thailand³ was planning a major redevelopment project including the construction of new buildings on a new campus. The 2,400 student enrollment included primary and secondary course offerings. It enjoyed a rather prestigious reputation, counting among its alumni many government officials and business leaders. The job description for Tholin included the administration and management of the contracting and construction of the new facilities. Ruth would be engaged in teaching English classes at the college and providing child care services for an orphan population as well as teaching in the Christian education program of the local church.

A personal attraction toward locating in the Asia/Pacific region was engendered during Tholin's military service in World War II. When he re-enlisted as an officer with the Seabees, he was sent to the Mariana Islands in the Pacific after U.S. troops had liberated them from the Japanese. The islands, principally Saipan, were strategically located for providing air support for the ultimate conquest of Japan. But Tholin's contribution went far beyond the building of runways and base facilities. The U.S. government policy for the Marianas had a human development component aimed at lifting

the local population out of years of enslavement by the occupying Japanese. He was sent to the University of Chicago for Japanese language training in 1943-44 to facilitate working with the local population. He returned to Saipan and was assigned oversight of a “self-help” effort engaging the displaced native population in a building program that included housing, a civilian hospital, administrative buildings, workshops, and water and sewage systems. Lt. Commander Tholin explained his mission “...of necessity almost the entire area of the island (Saipan) had been taken away from the civilians for military purposes. Those restricted to the internment camps can't feed or clothe themselves any longer. If we don't help, the population will starve.” The standard of living for the 18,000 natives and repatriated Japanese and Korean populations improved with the introduction of economic incentives and improved agricultural production designed to stimulate and sustain them in the wartime emergency situation.⁴

Service in the Pacific islands provided Tholin with an introduction to the cross-cultural mission challenge that would await him in Thailand, but his experience in major civil works projects was an unprecedented qualification for a missionary portfolio. The Presbyterian Board was astute in recognizing what Tholin could offer in the Bangkok setting and quickly “upped the ante” by presenting Tholin’s engineering experience and expertise as an unsalaried advisor to the Major’s office in Bangkok. The leadership of the Church of Christ in Thailand collaborated in the offer to the city hoping to publicly anchor its institutional place within the well-established realm of Hindu and Buddhist religious social and civil influence. In retrospect, Tholin thought the move would “demonstrate that the Christian Church is interested in the whole society. Just as it has ministered to the people of Thailand through educators, agriculturalists, and evangelists, it is now willing to minister to the people of Thailand through their government.” Theologically, Tholin appealed to an incarnational rationale for his mission, i.e., enabling the Word to become flesh.⁵

Tholin saw his role at the college in pragmatic terms, “...to increase the value of the

construction dollar.” He felt the savings he would introduce through competitive bidding and negotiated contracts would easily offset the full cost of his deployment. This effort did have a great impact on the College and its ability to provide a quality education to its students.

His first project for the Church of Christ in Thailand was the construction of a water gate for an irrigation ditch in rural Chiengrai. That was followed by constructing a drainage system for the college campus in Bangkok that previously had remained under water during the monsoon season. Colleagues quickly learned to respect his expertise when they occasionally accompanied him on his project visits to contractors and laborers. On one occasion, another missionary remembers Tholin instructing a worker to carefully sweep out the small amounts of debris inside the pipe before sealing it. He then proceeded to illustrate his point by drawing a circle on a piece of paper and writing down a simple formula projecting an exponential decrease the smallest constriction would cause in the movement of fluid through a pipe of the diameter being installed.⁶

He invested the first two years of his initial term dealing with delays holding up the building projects at the college. But the hiatus also give him time to re-work some building designs. Before Tholin’s arrival in Bangkok in 1962, the tallest building was a five-story structure. Soil conditions were considered inadequate to support high-rise construction. Linne examined the results of soil tests at the building sites and found them similar to the soggy soil conditions near Chicago’s Lake Michigan where pile-driving technology anchored all of the buildings dotting the city’s skyline in the underlying bedrock. He successfully introduced this technique into the new buildings at the college. A missionary cohort who was uncertain about Tholin’s pile-driving theory asked if he was sure that the structure would hold the weight of the hundreds of students occupying the classrooms. He replied that compared to the weight of the concrete and steel re-enforcements, the weight of the students would be “the equivalent to the weight of the feathers on a duck’s back.”⁷

Tholin’s reputation for building innovations led to contacts with American agencies wanting to expand office space in Bangkok. His advice

and encouragement resulted in the construction of the first high-rise building downtown—the 24-story Cokehai Building at Soi 26 Sukumvit Road completed in 1969.⁸ His prescience and confidence prevailed to such an extent that architects and engineers throughout the capital city adopted the technique creating a new skyline for Southeast Asia's major urban center.

While he was all too familiar with the effects of cronyism and patronage in Chicago, new dimensions of personal involvement and cultural influence were introduced into the bidding process at the Mayor's office. Tholin's role as an independent advisor was augured by receiving no compensation from the city, and further without remuneration by the city to the church for his services. The Lord Mayor gratuitously provided Tholin with an office in the Municipality Headquarters and made a small Volkswagen and driver available for him.

Tholin's major achievement was the completion of a \$50 million waste treatment system, a first for the City of Bangkok. The bidding involved no less than 57 companies, most from countries outside of Thailand. He was tasked with reviewing the details of each proposal and bringing recommendations to a committee chaired by an appointee of the mayor in consultation with the prime minister. British firms acquainted with favoritism shown them in the colonial period had to be informed of the new rules of the open bidding process Tholin, as independent consultant to the committee, had requested. Still, some firms found ways to add enhanced financial considerations if their proposals were selected. Then there was the political advocacy from embassies representing the countries of the foreign bidders exercised with the office of the prime minister. Tholin found it necessary to expand his consultation beyond the committee review by initiating personal communications with the committee chairperson regarding technical and negotiating issues. When the proposals for the multi-million dollar drainage project were narrowed down to nine, all were on Tholin's list of preferred contractors. He summarized his positive feelings about the process: "I felt that I was witnessing a 'conspiracy of integrity.'"⁹

The waste treatment project required the writing of a master plan for sewage and drainage

for the city. The new system would replace open drainage pits and septic tanks that would overflow in the rainy season and expose residents to cholera in the dry season. The details of the drainage project were a reprise of the system serving Chicago utilizing underground drainage pipes and collection tanks that drained into a huge chamber 75 feet below grade. Four pumps discharged the contents from the chamber into the Chao Phraya River.¹⁰ The title page of the master plan had an asterisk next to the author's name citing his connection with the Church of Christ in Thailand and the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Tholin noted that this caught the attention of readers in construction and financing across the region and in the offices of the World Bank in Washington, D.C. "Why is the church writing a report on sewage and drainage?" Tholin's response was "The church of Jesus Christ . . . is interested in the whole person, body, mind, and spirit. The spirit produces structure and the structure embraces spirit."¹¹

Not all of Tholin's expertise was welcomed when cultural influences came into play. Adherents of popular Hindu-Buddhist philosophy/belief warned that an evil spirit who occupied the underground was not to be disturbed by the operation of the underground pumping system. As long as Tholin was there, the pumps worked, but after his final retirement in 1974 and the system was left in the hands of

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locals, there were reports of major flooding in the streets of Bangkok. Conditions did not

improve until the king intervened in 1978 and finally ordered the pumps turned back on.¹²

The same issue was believed to complicate consideration of a proposal for a city subway system.¹³ A German company proposed the system as the solution to Bangkok's growing traffic congestion. Tholin agreed, but municipal authorities had their own solution consisting of bridging congested intersections with "flyovers." They argued that the city's high water levels made subterranean tunnels impractical. Tholin countered by citing major European cities like London where major water tributaries never impacted subways. The "flyovers" were installed but only succeeded in relocating traffic congestion leading into the "flyovers."¹⁴ It took until 2004 before resistance was overcome and Tholin's vision was realized with the completion of an underground subway system in the city.

The Tholin's residence in Thailand paralleled extensive U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia. Linne's correspondence offered astute observations and opinions. The U.S. would not be able to prevail in a land war in Vietnam. American influence in Asia would decline with China's rising, but China's economic prowess would be threatened by the newly independent island state of Singapore.¹⁵ As an American citizen with a public profile in Bangkok, Tholin successfully insulated himself from controversial American policies and influence in the region.

In the fall of 1968, after finishing two terms of service and completing the projects at the school and city, the Tholins prepared for retirement to their home in Naperville, Illinois. In reflecting on his six years of missionary service, Linne confided to a missionary colleague that he could not account for a single individual conversion that was the traditional mark of missionary achievement. But 50-years later in his book *Thailand Transformed: 1950-2012* author Culver Ladd tells the story of 33-year old Amnat Gekhun tod who the Municipality of Bangkok hired as a water pump controller on one of the lines installed under Tholin's administration. It was his job to keep his Prawet district from flooding. For his work he was saluted as a "community savior," especially during the endless rains of the critical monsoon season. He responded: "I feel good

when my neighbors come to thank me and give me moral support. Some bring food and energy drinks to cheer me up."¹⁶ Contributing to the sense of personal worth and dignity is the fruit of the service of a missionary of the gospel whose calling was to enhance the well-being of an entire city.

Before leaving, the King of Thailand authorized the awarding of two national distinctions to Linne; the Most Exalted Order of the White Elephant and the Most Noble Order of the Crown of Thailand. These awards are the equivalent of the Congressional Gold Medal and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in the United States. Others awarded the White Elephant include Queen Victoria, David Rockefeller, William Westmoreland, and Prince Norodom of Cambodia.

Upon their return to the United States the Tholins enjoyed being close to family, their son Richard (Professor of Christian Social Ethics at Evangelical Theological Seminary), his wife Phyllis and their children Kathy, Barb, and David. Linne and Ruth resumed their active participation in First EUB (Community UMC after merger) with Linne teaching a newly organized adult Sunday school class.

Meanwhile leaders of the Church of Christ in Thailand, having become accustomed to the efficient pace and productivity of Tholin's management of their construction projects, were overwhelmed by the thought of proceeding with the demands of additional projects without his expertise. They sent a two-word cable to the Presbyterian office of volunteer service: "Send Tholin." In spite of Ruth's concerns about Linne's declining health at the age of 73 and the unavailability of adequate medical treatment for expat personnel in Thailand, the Tholins agreed to return in 1971. This time the terms of service were arrived at independent of the Presbyterian board with the Tholins assuming their cost of travel. This final deployment would last long enough for Linne to oversee the construction of a new church sanctuary in Bangkok and a water treatment and sewage disposal plant for the Christian hospital and school in Chiengrai. He also returned to his work with the City of Bangkok drawing up plans for new fresh water lines to serve the growing city and a future subway system.

It became ever so clear that the claim Thailand was making on this couple was more than church or city demands for technical expertise. Before returning for this last visit, Linne confessed that “After seven years in Thailand, we consider it our second home. We look forward with great anticipation to arriving there and taking up where we left off. We have become so accustomed to living there that on our visits back to the states we feel a little lost among all the pale faces.”¹⁷ A bonding of heart, mind, and soul had been cultivated that would not be denied.

The Tholins took up fulltime retirement in Honolulu, Hawaii in 1974. Chronic illness and limitations of age had finally convinced Linne to take up a restful lifestyle, although still finding energy to volunteer his services with the national advocacy group Common Cause working on protecting the Oahu water supply and soils from ocean salinization. He died on July 1, 1978 at age 78. Ruth passed away in 1999 at 101 years of age, following an extended period in assisted living facilities in Honolulu and Chicago. Both are interred in the Punchbowl Military Cemetery in Hawaii.

Their son Richard once summarized his father’s life witness: “My father became a Christian in his early youth and he has never compartmentalized his religious life. He believes that the Christian Church should be interested in the whole person—physical, mental, and spiritual. . . As I teach courses on the Church and Society at the seminary, I find that my dad is a ‘living Exhibit A’ of what these courses are all about.”¹⁸ In his tribute at the memorial service in Hawaii, Richard concluded that his father had always been a missionary, during his service to the City of Chicago, to the church he loved and served faithfully, and uniquely fulfilled during the dozen years committed to Thailand. Linne’s mission: Always building and ultimately claiming “the beautiful City of God.”

* * * * *

1. The imagery of the Sunday school closing with music is the memory of Dr. James Will who was an active youth member of Norwood Park Evangelical

Church during Tholin’s leadership in the congregation. In addition to Sunday school superintendent, he was class leader, lay leader, chair and vice-chair of the church council.

2. This reflection appears in the application Tholin filed with the mission board of the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. in 1961. He adds: “Our son (Richard) is now carrying forward in the ministry; he is a graduate of Evangelical Theological Seminary in Naperville, Illinois class of 1952, and is now studying toward a doctorate at Union Theological Seminary in New York.”

3. Bangkok Christian College is related to the Church of Christ in Thailand, a united church with missionary origins from Presbyterian, Baptist, and Lutheran denominations.

4. Details appear in a report by Douglas Higdon, “Boot Strap Rehabilitation.”

5. Tholin preached a sermon entitled “Word Become Flesh in Thailand” at First EUB Church, Naperville, IL, on his first furlough in 1966. Quotations are taken from his handwritten manuscript.

6. Recalled in personal reflections of missionary colleague Thomas Scovel in a memorandum shared with the author. Tholin’s genius for producing graphic illustration/explanations was once invested in a full year teaching geometry at North Park College in Chicago.

7. Cited in the Scovel memorandum.

8. Culver S. Ladd, *Thailand Transformed: 1950-2012*, p. 12. Ladd a teacher and later researcher and consultant on economic development projects in Thailand recalls Tholin’s many contributions to development. Ladd suggests that an official delegation from Beijing on a visit to Bangkok in 1972 was so inspired by their first sight of high-rise buildings that they challenged ROC architects and builders to introduce them in China.

9. A.L. Tholin, letter to family dated April 18, 1965.

10. Ladd, p. 59.

11. Shared in Tholin’s 1966 furlough sermon at First EUB Church in Naperville, IL.

12. Ladd, p. 60.

13. Ladd, p. 84.

14. Recalled by missionary colleague Thomas Scovel in personal reflections shared with the author.

15. Tholin’s letter to family, April 18, 1965.

16. Ladd, p. 113.

17. Aurora [Illinois] *Beacon News* interview of Linne and Ruth Tholin by Ward Qury, January 24, 1970.

18. *Ibid.*

Robert Harman was the planning officer of the General Board of Global Ministries and from 1989-2000 was the chief administrative officer for the world mission program. He authored *From Missions to Mission: The History of Mission of the UMC 1968-2000*. **Richard Tholin** is the son of Linne Tholin. He served as Professor of Christian Ethics and dean at Garrett-Evangelical School of Theology. **Phyllis Eckardt Tholin**, a retired used and rare book dealer, is the wife of Richard.

The Professor Merl Harner I Knew

by

Paul Stuckey

Professor Merl Harner, in his earliest years at Bonebrake, had been one of my Dad's professors. Before graduation Dad (Doyle) did his major work under Harner. When I came to Bonebrake, soon to become United Theological Seminary, in the fall of 1953 Professor Harner was still an active member of the faculty. I was immediately attracted to him by the depth of his understanding of the New Testament, especially the Apostle Paul and the Pauline letters, and by his wit and wisdom. It was rumored around the halls of the seminary that "Professor Harner knew Paul better than Paul knew himself."

Professor Harner lived on a farm near Brookville and sold fresh eggs to students. The apocryphal story that made the rounds was that "If you bought a dozen eggs from Harner you'd get a B. If you bought two dozen you were guaranteed an A. If you didn't buy any eggs you were at risk of failing." Serving a rural student appointment and having family on the farm, I never needed any eggs, and I still passed the courses I took under Harner.

One day one of the students came running into class late. Harner was already lecturing. He called the student by name and said "If you'd have started as fast as you finished you'd have been here on time." Another day Professor Harner was lecturing eloquently on Paul's teaching and preaching in Greece. He had just gotten out the words "The foolish pseudo-philosopher in his false wisdom" (then the bell rang and one of the students started to leave the room). Without missing a beat Harner continued "picks up his brief case and rudely leaves the room."

In the New Testament theology course, Harner was insightfully and helpfully listing the various theories of the Resurrection when one of the students raised his hand and asked: "Dr. Harner exactly what do you believe about the Resurrection? Harner smiled and said: "I could develop a real bad coughing spell about now." No sooner were these words spoken than the bell rang and the class ended. The next day we came to class, but there was no Professor Harner.

Instead a message on the board read: "No class today, real bad coughing spell." I never did discover what happened.

In a special sacred moment in class one day, Professor Harner told of an old farmer who would regularly testify at mid-week prayer meeting: "I thank God that there are knee prints on that old sand hill of mine." Harner looked us in the eye and said: "Ladies and gentlemen, as you minister there better be knee prints on that old sand hill of yours." He was prophetic and right!

After graduation from United I was ordained in the Ohio Sandusky Conference at Camp St. Marys. I asked Professor Harner to be one of my sponsors. He immediately agreed and came to St. Marys and laid his hands on my head as I was ordained.

This is the Merl Harner I knew and loved. I have always been glad to call him my mentor, inspiration, and friend. I pray that in some small way some of the spirit that was his has been and will always be with me.

Paul Stuckey is a retired pastor who served many churches in the Ohio Sandusky and West Ohio Conferences. He was also editor of youth publications for the EUB church and district superintendent in the UMC. In retirement he served as associate pastor of Christ Church in Kettering where he still lives.

From the Editor

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